

The Washington Post

Exhibit

Morning Mix

# Lesbians win \$10,000 judgment against county clerk for calling them an ‘abomination’

By Rachel Chason August 31, 2017

Last year, Amanda Abramovich and Samantha Brookover headed to their county clerk’s office in West Virginia to receive a marriage license. What should have been one of the happiest days of their lives quickly took a sour turn.

A deputy clerk in Gilmer County allegedly chastised the women as she processed their marriage license, calling them an “abomination” and telling them God would “deal” with them, according to a complaint filed in the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of West Virginia.

A year and a half later, the Gilmer County clerk’s office is paying Abramovich and Brookover, who have been together for seven years, \$10,000 in damages and issuing them an apology, the Associated Press reported on Wednesday.

When the couple requested a marriage license they expected an eye roll or another small sign of disapproval from the clerk’s office in the largely conservative county — 75 percent of the residents voted for President Trump — but they didn’t expect the “tirade of harassment and disparagement” they received, according to the complaint.

Deputy Clerk Debbie Allen slammed the paperwork on the desk, said she was a Christian and called the couple an “abomination” in a rant that continued for several minutes, according to court documents. Another clerk joined in, shouting that it was Allen’s “religious right” to harass the couple, according to the complaint.

The Supreme Court had ruled seven months earlier that the Constitution gives same-sex couples the right to wed, no matter where in America they live.

Abramovich remained silent throughout the abuse. Brookover cried.

They received their marriage license, but it was not the joyous day the women or their family members, who came with a camera, had hoped for.

When Brookover’s mother later called the county clerk’s office to report the encounter, she said County Clerk Jean Butcher told her she knew about the interaction and believed the couple deserved the treatment they received. The next same-sex couple that sought a marriage license, she allegedly said, “would get the same or worse” treatment.

A week after later, Allen told the Charleston Gazette-Mail that she didn’t call the couple an “abomination.” In fact, Allen said, “I felt I talked nicely to them.”

She did acknowledge that she told the couple what they were doing was wrong and God would judge them, according to the Gazette-Mail.

“I just told them my opinion,” she said. “I just felt led to do that. I believe God was standing with me and that’s just my religious belief.”

But in a news release on Aug. 30, Gilmer County seemed to do an about-face. The county acknowledged that Brookover and Abramovich “were disrespected and disparaged by staff” because they were a same-sex couple.

“That was wrong,” the news release stated. “It is the policy of Gilmer County and the Gilmer County Clerk’s Office that all people seeking services and doing business with the County will be treated courteously and with respect regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.”

The lawsuit, which was filed by Americans United for Separation of Church and State, Fairness West Virginia and the law firm Mayer Brown, sought damages for the emotional distress caused by Allen’s actions.

In addition to paying the couple \$10,000, the county also agreed to require all officials and employees of the county commission and county clerk’s office to

participate in a training program provided by Fairness West Virginia, an advocacy organization dedicated to the fair and equal treatment of LGBT West Virginians.

"Consenting adults should never be made to feel embarrassed or ashamed when marrying the person they love," the women said in a statement. "It will be a comfort to know that this behavior will no longer be allowed in the Gilmer County Courthouse."

The women, who grew up in rural West Virginia, had applied for a marriage license once before, in October 2014, after West Virginia's governor at the time, Earl Ray Tomblin (D), said he would stop defending the state's ban on same-sex marriage. But Allen refused to issue the marriage license because neither had presented a driver's license listing an address in Gilmer County, according to the complaint. Even after the couple's landlord came with them to attest to their residency, Allen allegedly refused to listen.

Their interactions with the county clerk's office weren't the first time the women felt they were judged for their sexual orientations, according to the *Gazette-Mail*. They became a couple when they were in high school but didn't tell anyone until after graduation because they were worried about how their friends might respond. Abramovich also said she was used to her stepfather being "a little hateful."

"But to have a complete stranger — someone that doesn't know me — scream like that, it really cut down to the bone," she told the *Gazette-Mail*.

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Rachel graduated from Duke University in 2017 and is a reporting intern covering local politics.  Follow @rachel\_chason



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## WELCOME to the Office of the County Clerk, Jean Butcher!

**10 Howard Street**  
Glenville, WV 26351

**OFFICE HOURS:** 8 am - 4 pm Monday thru Friday

**CONTACT:** (304) 462-7641 [jean.butcher@gilmercountywv.gov](mailto:jean.butcher@gilmercountywv.gov)

The County Clerk's position is an elected position for a six year term. The responsibilities of the County Clerk include the management of records of the County Commission and certain election duties.

**TERM:** The County Clerk is elected by the citizens of the county to serve a six year term of office.  
The present term expires December 31, 2022

**DUTIES:** The responsibilities of the County Clerk and staff are:

- Issuance of marriage licenses, birth and death certificates
- Record births, marriages and deaths in the county
- Serve as Chief Voter Registration Official for the county
- Registrar for all voters in the county
- Conduct Absentee voting
- Serve as election officer; prepare ballot and other election related duties; receive filings for county elective offices
- Maintain custody and integrity of the county's voting machines, ballot boxes and other election supplies
- Conduct training sessions for poll workers
- Serves as recorder of all documents
- Keep records of County Commission transactions
- Keep minutes of all County Commission Meetings
- Responsible for the book keeping of the county including budget, accounting and payroll
- Prepare Financial Statement for the county
- Set up appointments for County Commission
- Responsible for public notice of all Commission meetings
- Serve as Secretary for Civil Service Commission
- Issue hunting and fishing licenses
- Provide notary services
- Issue military service discharge records
- Probate wills and assist in administration of estates

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